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ABSTRACT

Sharing the cultural heritage is not the only responsibility of literary education in the K-12 curriculum. Still, teachers' current lack of agreement on the kind of literary experience important to young people, coupled with the failure of all but one of the major national school reform reports to mention literature as important to achieving a quality education, signals a present dilemma. While waiting for a redefinition of literacy, educators can consider the ramifications of four basic issues that must be resolved in K-12 program in literary education: (1) a teacher's concern about the transaction between book and reader must not blind him or her to the recognition that the quality of the literary work affects the quality of the literary experience; (2) programs in literature must provide young people with selected major literary experiences if Americans are to develop a common culture; (3) understanding and appreciating major literary works is dependent on developing the background knowledge and experience needed for understanding; and (4) educators must reexamine the traditional and contemporary canon of major literary works and identify those that speak most persuasively to young people. These four issues long for clarification and resolution. Teachers of literature and specialists in the literary transaction need to join current efforts to seek quality in the English curriculum by reexamining the content of programs as well as the methods used to teach. (HTH)

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The Current Crisis in Literary Education

James R. Squire

"A good curriculum marks the points of significance so that the student does not wander aimlessly over the terrain, dependent solely on chance to discover the landmarks of human achievement." So writes William A. Bennett, Secretary of Education, in To Reclaim A Legacy, his report last year on the humanities in higher education. Few teachers and scholars in English would disagree even though their perspective on the humanities in the school curriculum might differ substantially from that expressed in the report on higher education published by the National Endowment. One ultimate purpose of the curriculum in literature surely is to help young people develop what E. D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy, rooted in civilization's lasting version, its highest ideals and aspirations, and its heritage."

In our K-12 curriculum in literary education, sharing the culture heritage is, of course, not our only responsibility. Extending and deeping the responses of students to literary experiences of many kinds is certainly a prerequisite and more basic goal since the willingness to engage in a literary experience at all is dependent on the attitude of each reader and on the development of his or her competence in responding.

Still our present lack of agreement on the kind of literary experience important to young people coupled with the failure of all of the recent major national school reform reports (save for Mortimer Adler's) to mention literature as important to achieving an education of quality signals a present dilemma. And the absence during the past ten years, until very recently, of serious attention to the content and teaching of literature in our professional journals, on professional conferences, and state assessment efforts reflects widespread confusion over purpose. This connection is different in this respect from all recent national meetings and hopefully signals an effort to redres the balance. Indeed,

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anecdotal reports from teacher educators throughout the country indicate so little provision today for common literary experience that in many of our classrooms we find that many prospective teachers of English have shared little reading in common--not Hamlet or Macbeth, not David Copperfield or Huckleberry Finn, not The Concord Hymn or When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed. Not A Wrinke in Time, nor Where The Wild Thing's Are, not Pinocchio or Charlotte's Web. Not even The Death of the Hired Man or The Pied Piper of Hamlin. Secretary Bennett's alarming discourse on the low state of the humanities in higher education seems to validate such observations, and we can only welcome the intent of the announced new project to define our heritage headed by Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn for the National Endowment for the Humanities. A national assessment of student knowledge about 100 selective titles may seem questionable, particularly if the specific titles reflect only traditional western literature written for adults. But guidelines for achieving cultural literacy for every age group? That is important.

What then must we do while waiting for the redefinition? Begin by considering the ramifications of four basic issues that must be resolved in our K-12 programs in literary education.

1. A teacher's concern about the transaction between book and reader must not blind him to recognizing that the quality of the literary work impacts the quality of the literary experience.

The past decade has seen substantial growth in teacher understanding of the nature of the transaction between book and reader and the significance of the teacher focusing on enhancing the points of contact between book and reader.

Louise Rosenblatt, supported by the Dartmouth Seminar recommendations, has had widespread influence in directing our attention to the responses of the reader.

But nothing in Rosenblatt's writing or in other major documents on response to literature -- in the Darmouth Seminar report, for example, or in the fine new analysis by Robert Probst -- suggest that we can ignore the quality of the literary work in eliciting response and our obligation to introduce young people to varied works of many different kinds.

Too often today's teachers seem more preoccupied with engagement and interaction to selections of any kind than with response to works that really communicate literary experience. Indeed so institutionaly has Rosenblatt's work become that some practicioners talk about "the response approach" in constrast to some other approach to literature. Whenever concern with interactive literary experience becomes isolated from the literature which gives it birth, we run the risk of substituting method for content. Not all works present equally valid literary experience. Not all can elicit equally valid response. By definition, great works of literature written for young people today and yesterday transmit great experience and it is with the great works of literature that we must be concerned when we seek common literary experience. We need to remember that I. A. Richards, the first great researcher in response to literature, reminded us more than fifty years ago that much contemporary writing is pseudo-literature, written to evoke stereotyped images and responses already in the minds of readers. "Such stereotyped responses," he wrote, "seem to have their opportunity whenever a poem seems to, or does, involve views and emotions already fully predisposed in the reader's mind, so that what happens appears to be more of the reader's doing than the poet's. The button is pressed, and then the author's work is done, for immediately the record starts playing in quasi (or total) independence of the poem which is supposed to be its origin or instrument." As Richards demonstrates through his protocols, such mechanized reactions can substitute for real literary experience. Leslie Strata and John Dixons new monograph reminds us that such mechanized sterotyped reactions are a continuing educational problem. Our present danger is that we

may be permitting too much pseudo-literature to be substituted for real literary experience and thus be blocking a real literary education.

In selecting works for student reading -- class, group, or individual reading -- we need to strive to reduce the reading of pseudo-works and focus on titles that can elicit genuine response. This is especially important for titles that are selected for shared experience.

2. Our programs in literature must provide young people with selected major literary experiences if we are to develop a common culture.

We talk much about our common heritage and our responsibility for teaching it, but the common heritage is significantly uncommon if children and young people do not share some literary experiences in common. Whether Dr. Seuss or E. B. White in the primary school, Mark Twain or John Steinbeck in the secondary, key works serve as benchmarks for our culture.

Are young people likely to develop sensitivity to American values and ideals unless they have experienced the great statements of these ideals? Who can think the thoughts of Lincoln unless nourished on the same food? The great rhetorical tradition ranging from the Federalist Papers and the Farewell address, through the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, the Kennedy Inaugural, and Martin Luther King's "I Had A Dream" contain ideas which must be shared with each new generation of Americans. Unless we are willing to specify those works to be taught and experienced by each new generation, we run the danger of isolating today's students from the continuity of our culture.

Few teachers and scholars seem willing today to specify many works that must be read by all children in our schools. Too few, I think. The coalition of College and University English Associations convened by

NCTE during the summer of 1984 reflected this reluctance, but also defined the problem which must be resolved:

"So much excellent literature exists that different schools may reasonably make different selections for their students. Many reports raise the question of what students should read. A number suggest the importance of establishing a common body of literature. Students should read works that help them define and understand their own values and experiences and those of others. All students should read widely in literature from their own cultures and regions, from the pluralistic American experiences, and from the world at large."

There may be some differences then in the works that are read and taught from school to school, but perhaps not differences in the quality of the experiences. This means surely that not anything goes -- in primary school, in the middle school, in the high school, or even in the university.

There will be gaps in the literary experiences of boys and girls as they move out of high school, but these gaps must not include all major literary experience -- all Shakespearean experience, for example, or all Greek myths, all Dickens, all Mark Twain, and all writers of the New England Renaissance any more than all of the great works written for children and adolescents.

3. <u>Understanding and appreciating mature literary works is dependent to a considerable degree on the developing the background knowledge and experience needed for understanding</u>.

For fifty years Louise Rosenblatt and her followers have demonstrated that the knowledge and experience that readers bring to the reading of a work will impact substantially the experience of the particular work. Now cognitive psychologists and students of reading comprehension are

demonstrating the power of prior knowledge and prior experience in reading. P. David Pearson, for example, has completed studies which demonstrate that, when aptitude for language is held constant, prior knowledge is the most important single fact affecting the quality of comprehension.

The present research in what sometimes called schema theory, raises interesting questions concerning the responsibilities of the school to develop a knowledge sufficient to permit successful understanding of mature literary works.

Children unfamiliar with Greek and Roman mythology are unlikely to understand the many references to the gods and goddesses that appear throughout literature written for adults.

Some understanding of traditional and classic children's stories basic to our culture are prerequisite to responding to allusions and metaphor in adult literary work. References to "white washing," to "skies falling," or to "the Holy Grail" will otherwise puzzle uncomprehending readers.

To understand contemporary references to various ethnic heritages, one must share to a degree the written documents of those heritages, passed from one generation to the next.

Prior knowledge of the structure of the full length play is a prerequisite for experiencing the structure of a difficult, long dramatic work. Must we always begin with Shakespeare?

Some familiarity with rhetorical structures must preceed successful experience in responding to the eloquence of major addresses in our history. Knowledge about the American Civil War, about President Lincoln, and about the conditions which gave rise to "The Gettysburg Address" provide a critical schema for responding to that important document.

The ways in which prior knowledge affects response are legion; the school's responsibility is to build the background needed to bring literature alive. One important task facing curriculum-makers in literature is to identify those essential literary experiences which we will share and then to build systematically the background that readers need. At every level, perhaps 10 to 25 percent of all selections need to be titles shared through common experience. At the beginning levels and indeed throughout the curriculum some of these must be read-aloud selections. A curriculum defined in this manner will leave much time for important and varied individual reading experiences, but it can also build knowledge, sensitivity and maturity.

4. We need to reexamine the traditional and contemporary canon of major literary works and identify those which speak most persuasively to young people living today.

Response to literature is affected by time, age, sex, social and cultural experience. We know that great reading experiences for young adolescents -- Henry Higgins or Tom Sawyer, for example -- may have little appeal for older readers.

Changing cultural conditions also affect responses to literary works. Given their personal experience with the class struggle, young readers in Britain have tended to respond more favorably to D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers than do American youth who lack sufficient points of contact with the central working class experience in the novel and have been more concerned with tales of racial conflict, such as those transmitted through Cry, The Beloved Country or To Kill A Mockingbird.

Response to literature can also change in time. "Julius Caesar," with its complicated governmental intrigues, seemed more teachable thirty-five years ago when the machinations of Brutus, Cassius, and Anthony

seemed to parallel the political intrigues and jockying for power within the Soviet Union. Romeo and Juliet obviously touches deeper roots today in the adolescent consciousness than it did when I was growing up. Young lovers stranded with their new values against the blackness of Venetian society. What a painful metaphor to express alienation of many of today's youth.

What these illustrations suggest is the need for reexamining the vast body of literature, established and contemporary, to identify for young people living in our post-technological age those works of the past and present most likely to elicit rich literary response. The selections taught to all children should not only meet criteria of excellence, but should be those works likely to speak most directly to all of our children.

These four issues then long for clarification and resolution. Teachers of literature and specilists in the literary transaction need to join current efforts to seek quality in the English curriculum by reexamining the content of our programs as well as the methods used to teach. Whether the current state of curriculum and instruction in literature is the inevitable result of overstressing basic skills and competence testing or reflect the disquieting debates concerning Marxist and deconstructionist theory raging in many univeristy faculties, we can agree, I trust, with Norman Cantor that today's debate over the nature of literature the humanities -- what should be taught, how it should be taught -- will determine how we and our children and grandchildren view the past, read a work of literature, listen to music, look at paintings and sculpture, and perceive our culture in relation to that of the Third World. These are not small matters. They go to the heart of our cultural and political life.

Twenty years ago poet William Stafford said it another way in Freinds to This Ground, a statement from The Council's Commission on Literature that reads as if written for today.

"..... the values in literature are more and more identified as characteristic of a fountain rather than a reservoir," he wrote, "Literature is seen as inducing a progressive experience which can improve taste as it increases life; the kind of experience it offers distinguishes it from those activities which merely bring about increments in knowledge without changing the person ..... "earlier apologists for literature have too often been content to rely on the imposing riches of the cultural heritage," and have tended to neglect the distinctive transforming effect of literature." (Certainly I link myself not with this dead order but with those who see that the transforming effect of literature can occur only as children are brought into contact with literature of the highest quality.)

Stafford quote Wallace Stevens reference to "The poem of the act of the mind" and I can think of no better way to end my plea. "Literature provides not just new content by an inducement for the fullest play of individual powers. A reader may enter a new order of experience in which his own powers are reinforced with progressions of thought and feeling, and the effect may transform even those readers commonly considered unavailable for literary experience.

This, fellow teachers, is our charge, our opportunity, our responsibility. I ask you, "How well have we been meeting this obligation during recent years."

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